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## The ten best protest songs

By **Billy Bragg**

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### 1 'PEOPLE GET READY' The Impressions

For most people, the term "protest music" conjures up the image of some white kid strumming an acoustic guitar, but here comes Curtis Mayfield playing a soulful Fender Strat, singing perhaps the finest of the Civil Rights-era ballads.

### 2 'ABRAHAM, MARTIN AND JOHN' Marvin Gaye

I didn't grow up in a political household and, as a result, got my politics from Tamla-Motown Chartbusters albums rather than Karl Marx.

### 3 'A CHANGE IS GONNA COME' Sam Cooke

Cooke combines gospel, blues and swing to create one of the great political pop polemics, directly inspired by Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind". Give me the dramatic sweep of this arrangement and Cooke's aching vocal over Dylan's monotone any day.

### 4 'ROLL OVER BEETHOVEN' Chuck Berry

The most revolutionary pop song ever written? Here's the moment when the generation gap cracks open with a shattering blast of ringing guitar and a heavy backbeat. All hail rock'n'roll! Deliver me from the days of old!

### 5 'YOUNG, GIFTED AND BLACK' Bob & Marcia

Visualise me, a 12-year-old reggae wannabe, at the Park Modern School disco, singing these lyrics at the top of my voice. Trojan Records did more for multiculturalism in this country than a whole heap of carnivals.

### 6 'SMALL AXE' The Wailers

From its opening track, "Get up, Stand up", the Wailers album *Burnin'* contains some of Bob Marley's most political songs. "Small Axe" stands out for its dancehall groove. This celebration of the minority victorious over the majority - "If you are a big tree, we are a small axe/

Sharpened to cut you down, ready to cut you down" - offers encouragement to activists everywhere, except perhaps the Woodland Trust.

### 7 'WHAT'S GOING ON?' Marvin Gaye

It was the US anarchist Emma Goldman who said: "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution." Could she have had this song in mind when she said it?

### 8 'POLICE AND THIEVES' The Clash

The Westway wonders were never more potent than when they took Junior Murvin's song and played it punky. It was the cultural crossover with reggae that politicised punk. This is where that crossover happened.

### 9 'BOURGEOIS BLUES' Leadbelly

Huddie Ledbetter didn't take kindly to being refused lodging in Washington, DC, in 1938 on account of his colour. Here, he takes his revenge on that bourgeois town.

### 10 'GIVE MORE POWER TO THE PEOPLE' The Chi-Lites

James Brown, Sly Stone and Gil Scott-Heron all made great political dance music, but this cut from the Chi-Lites gets my vote every time.

*'Must I Paint You a Picture: The essential Billy Bragg'* is out now on *Cooking Vinyl*

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